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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000347

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS  
NSC FOR DORMANDY

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TAGS: [PREL PHUM SMIG CE KWMM LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: POST-TSUNAMI REPORTS OF CHILD  
TRAFFICKING AND SEXUAL- AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ARE  
OVERBLOWN

REF: COLOMBO 324

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission for reasons  
1.4 (b,d)

1. (SBU) Summary. Sensationalist speculation in the local media that the December 26 tsunami would spawn "spin-off" misery for Sri Lanka's displaced--e.g. hordes of homeless orphans, increased child trafficking, and an uptick in sexual- and gender-based violence--has proven, fortunately, unfounded so far. Over 95% of children orphaned in the tsunami are living with extended family members. Only one

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case of attempted child trafficking has been documented thus far, another remains under investigation. Neither of the two reports of rape in tsunami-affected areas since December 26 occurred in welfare centers for the displaced. According to anecdotal evidence presented to UNHCR representatives, domestic violence in welfare centers is increasing, but data confirming this trend do not exist. The vast majority of reports of child trafficking, sexual-and gender-based violence, and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) child recruitment in tsunami-affected areas and welfare camps appear unfounded--and are perhaps the result of the international and local media's seemingly infinite appetite for tales of tsunami suffering. End summary.

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Most Tsunami Orphans Living With Extended Family  
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2. (SBU) Local and international media coverage after the December 26 tsunami focused on the fate of children who might have been orphaned by the destructive waves. According to UNICEF Protection Officer Bo Viktor Nylund, despite the heavy death toll exacted by the tsunami--about 31,000 confirmed killed and another 5,000 missing--only 1,087 children lost both parents in the December 26 tsunami. Of this total, all but 40 are living with extended family members, an arrangement UNICEF is working to encourage in both the near and long term. The remaining children are living with community members or are in orphanages. UNICEF's Nylund told poloff that children in 3,674 families lost one parent.

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Reports of Trafficking and Gender-Based Violence Overblown  
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3. (C) Despite the increased vulnerability of child victims of the tsunami, and despite harrowing and sensationalist stories printed in the local media in the initial days after the tsunami, the actual incidence of post-tsunami child trafficking documented so far, fortunately, is minimal. Harendra de Silva, Director of the National Child Protection Agency (NCPA), told poloff that there was only one documented case of attempted child trafficking after the tsunami: that of a grandfather attempting to sell his grandchild in Colombo. UNICEF documented this case (initially reported by the BBC), and is looking into one other possible case in Batticaloa. In all, UNICEF has heard of fewer than five cases of child trafficking since the tsunami. Child recruitment by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), however, continues despite the tsunami. UNICEF Chief Protection Officer Christine Watkins told poloff that 51 children had been recruited by the LTTE since December 26, although only 4 of them were from tsunami welfare centers (Reftel).

4. (SBU) In the crush of increased international and local media coverage after the tsunami, many media outlets erroneously reported an increase in gender- and sexual-based violence in welfare camps housing tsunami-displaced persons. NCPA's de Silva and UNHCR representatives Savithri Weragoda and Monika Sandvik all concurred that these reports were overblown by the press. NCPA's de Silva noted that only a few cases of sexual abuse against children had been documented, although some NGOs had told him more sexual harassment was occurring in the welfare centers. De Silva pointed out that an increase in reporting from welfare

centers would not surprise him, as closer quarters and less privacy naturally lead to an increase of reporting of child sexual abuse.

15. (SBU) In response to increased reports of sexual violence against women in welfare centers, UNHCR's Weragoda told poloff that there were two documented rapes in tsunami-affected areas, neither of which occurred in welfare

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centers. UNHCR's Sandvik told poloff that anecdotal reports of domestic violence were increasing, but was not aware of data supporting the accounts. She explained that an increase in domestic violence within displaced communities--while of concern-- is not unusual. In December 2004 UNHCR launched a campaign in Sri Lanka to raise awareness about sexual- and gender-based violence, including domestic abuse and sexual harassment in the workplace. While the tsunami interrupted UNHCR's media blitz, the organization is currently re-tooling some of its messages to better fit a post-tsunami environment. UNHCR hopes to continue the campaign through 2005.

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